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A Slumgullion of IGO Information Systems

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Author
Church, James A

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International Documents Round-Up
“A Slumgullion of IGO Information Systems”
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James Church

A few years ago, it was still possible for a documents librarian to be familiar with most of the databases of the world’s major international governmental organizations (IGOs). International organizations such as UNESCO or the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) had several systems that could be searched within a reasonable period of time. Once these had been checked, one could be relatively certain that all the available sources had been consulted. If UNESCO documents were needed, the librarian could consult the online database UNESBIB/UNES-DOC and, if necessary, the UNESCO List of Documents and Publications for older materials. For the International Labour Organization (ILO), there was the LABORDOC database and the print index International Labour Documentation. For the United Nations, there was the UNBIS database and all of the historic UN print indexes; the commercial database AccessUN and the full-text UN Optical Disc System (ODS) pretty much completed the picture. It was a much smaller world—confusing and ambiguous at times, but still a world with manageable boundaries.

The IGO Information Tornado

Those days are gone. In the recent years the number of IGO databases has snowballed with an incredible, stupefying speed. For a good example of this, pay a visit to the UNESCO web site. There you will find no less than sixty bibliographic databases, twenty-two digital libraries systems, and forty-seven online directories for a total of 129 systems for UNESCO offices and institutes around the world[1]. There is some over-lap within the categories, but not much. To make things worse, many of these systems are listed by acronym only; for example, the IBE Bibliographic Catalogue and the MOST Digital Library. UNESCO does not spell out the acronyms or provide annotations; presumably the researcher needs to know in advance what IBE and MOST stand for (International Bureau of Education and Management of Social Transformations) and what these agencies do. Some of the links on the UNESCO list are dead; other database entries do not even contain a link; for example, the Terminology Bibliographic Document Catalogue, whatever

that is, has no link. Some databases can be searched but return no results—you enter a query and get an error message—while others provide citations for gray literature that is almost impossible to obtain.

I wish this was all a joke, but it is not. And unfortunately, UNESCO is not alone—the FAO and the ILO are drifting in the same direction. The FAO has an entire “Glossary of FAO Databases and Information Systems” page with close to sixty information systems on aquaculture, fisheries, statistics (at least six of these), legal codes, forestry, marketing, meteorology, policy-making, plant species, seeds, pastures, crops, animal diversity, and more[3]. The page is so large it needs an A–Z listing. Fortunately the site has database annotations, but beyond the fact that there is just too much information here, there are two reasons why librarians need to be concerned. The first is the database list is next to impossible to find; the user needs to select the “WAICENT Information Finder” link on the FAO page and proceed five clicks deep into the site. No one except a very determined researcher will drill down that many levels. The second reason is much of the page is geared toward practitioners and is of little interest to academic libraries[4]. But some of the databases are definitely of interest. These include AGRIS, which offers more than 2.7 million references on all aspects of world agriculture; FAOLEX, which provides full-text international treaties and laws related to food, agriculture, and renewable resources; and FAOSTAT, the subscription-based and partially free FAO statistical system. Clearly, someone still needs to direct library users to relevant IGO information systems and help them determine which are of interest to their library community via some sort of selective and descriptive process.

The ILO may seem like a breath of fresh air by way of comparison—it has only twenty-nine databases[5]. The data-base page is not difficult to find on the ILO site. It is two clicks away from the main ILO page under “information resources” and is broken down alphabetically and by category: journals, legal information, statistics, terminology, vocational training, social security, and occupational health and safety. Yet even when a site is this well-designed, some expert users may not find what they are looking for. As an international documents specialist at the University of California, Berkeley, I serve a well-educated group of students, staff, and faculty. The graduate students, in particular are, active users of inter-national government information. Last semester a graduate student came to me asking about labor

legislation from foreign countries. He knew about ILOLEX, the ILO database of international labour law, but had not discovered NATLEX, the ILO database of national labor legislation. It was exactly what he needed, but I was not surprised he had not found it. Even for well-educated, persistent web users, the overwhelming flood of information has become too much.

For the three IGOs I have just delineated there are at least 220 information systems. If we add a few more IGOs, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (twenty-one data-bases); and the World Health Organization (at least twenty-two, if you include the WHO regional offices), we begin to approach the number of databases typically subscribed to by a large research library. In a world of information illiteracy and rising user expectations, this is a serious problem. A mad dash to create information systems for every conceivable topic in every IGO institute worldwide has resulted in an information tornado that no one librarian can expect to tame.

A solution on the part of international organizations does not seem forthcoming. As long as IGOs maintain a decentralized system of offices, a large and diverse clientele will be using this information, with a correspondingly large group of information architects creating diverse IT systems that must be used and mastered by “the experts”—us.

The New IGO Documentation

Amidst this chaos there is, of course, some good news. Despite the fact that there is arguably too much information on the web, and much of it badly organized, at least the information is accessible. Until recently much of the internal documentation of IGOs was restricted and not available to the public at all. By “documentation,” I mean materials and papers created to support the work of the organization; a good example are the masthead documents of the United Nations, but also the working papers, meeting records, decisions, and planning documents of international financial institutions, such as the Trade Dispute Settlements of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Thus Robert Schaaf, the senior specialist in United Nations and International Organizations for the Library of Congress, could say in 1990 that such international organizations as the GATT, the International

Monetary Fund, the World Bank Group, and the WHO “do not, with rare exceptions, distribute documents to libraries” and cites other examples of IGOs with overly restrictive information policies[6].

The Internet and public consciousness of IGOs in a globalized world has changed this. Much WTO documentation remains restricted, but an enormous amount of it is now made available online. The IMF and World Bank now post their Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and country reports on their web sites. Even the World Health Organization, singled out by Schaaf as an example of an IGO with an “overly restrictive information policy,” now posts some internal documentation on the web, although it is not easy to find[7]. Clearly, the increase of IGO information available on the web is an excellent development in many respects. It is with the organization (and ultimately the preservation) of this information with which documents librarians now need to be concerned.

The Solution

One further irony is that several years ago, the UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library and some UN specialized agency libraries did collaborate to design a shared information system. International documents specialists may recall when the UN unveiled UNCAPS—the “United Nations System Shared Cataloguing and Public Access System”—which was a common interface for the UN, FAO, the World Intellectual Property Organization, and UNESCO catalogs, among others. Needless to say, the bureaucracies have long since parted and gone their separate ways. The old UNCAPS database (uncaps.unsystem.org) is dead—you can get a glimpse of it on the Internet Archive, but I have no idea what happened to the effort. Some UN pages and academic library sites still link to it.

One is tempted to ask the organizations to please just stop making so many databases. This is not likely. International organizations have always been bureaucracies, and as long as they remain so their information policies and practices will remain idiosyncratic and decentralized. The solution, in my view, is simply a matter of being attentive and proactive. The web is now the first place many users go to find information. Librarians need to be spending time on the IGO pages, either devising search engines or content management systems to organize the information, or creating online research guides that describe and highlight

relevant IGO sources. One important fact that documents librarians should know is users do look at library research guides. At the University of California, Berkeley, we installed a Google Analytics applet on our pages and discovered that they get hit hundreds of times per day during peak research seasons. Librarians need to be creating detailed subject guides that digest and synthesize this information, and they need to continually monitor and track a maelstrom of information systems that change fast. I would argue that this is now one of the most critical components of our profession, and unless we can memorize the names and URLs of several hundred IGO databases, one we cannot afford to neglect.

References

1. The UNESCO site with these links is called “Information services/Databases” www.unesco.org/unesdi/. The page claims to include 120 bibliographic and full text databases produced by UNESCO “in its domains of competence.”
2. As of this writing (January 2007) all the databases for the UNESCO Bangkok office were dysfunctional, for example, www2.unescobkk.org/elib/search/search1.htm.
3. The page is here www.fao.org/waicent/portal/glossary_en.asp and is very difficult to find on the FAO web site unless you know precisely where to look.
4. For example the “Conversion Factors” database which features “factors used by national fishery statistical offices to convert landed fish weights into live weight equivalents.”
5. See www.ilo.org/public/english/support/lib/dblist.htm
6. Schaaf, Robert W. “Information Policies of International Organizations,” *Government Publications Review*, Vol. 17, Issue 1, January-February 1990, p. 51.
7. Ibid, p. 54 and “World Health Organization Documentation” www.who.int/gb/e/index.html. This documentation has only been available since 2002.